

STATE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TEAM

DSS has established the State Technical Assistance Team (STAT), located in the Division of Legal Services, to assist in child abuse, child neglect, child sexual abuse, child exploitation and pornography, child fatality, and other investigations at the request of the Department, law enforcement, or other child protection agencies. In 1990, House Bill 1370 was passed which mandated the development of a team to provide training, expertise, and assistance to county multidisciplinary teams for the investigation of child sexual abuse cases, particularly in situations where there are multiple victims and/or multiple perpetrators. STAT is also responsible for implementing, managing and institutionalizing Missouri's Child Fatality Review Program (CFRP), to include training and support for the 115 county-based CFRP panels, as well as collecting data to facilitate development of prevention strategies. STAT works closely with Missouri's Children's Trust Fund, the Children's Division, Department of Health and Senior Services, as well as local CFRP panels and the various disciplines they are made up of these panels.

Since its implementation in 1992, the Child Fatality Review Program has collected comprehensive data on all child fatalities – natural, accidental and inflicted. Every child death is evaluated, and those that meet program criteria, are reviewed in detail. While the total number has remained relatively constant for over a decade (approximately 1,200 deaths per year), the death rate has steadily declined (from approximately 35 deaths per 100,000 to about 26 deaths per 100,000 children). There are many contributing factors as to why fewer children are dying, but knowing more about how and why they die, and sharing that information with our child protection partners is an invaluable component.

STAT's investigative responsibilities are considerably different than those of the Children's Division. As a law enforcement unit within the Department of Social Services, STAT investigations must rise to the level of "beyond a reasonable doubt." Most STAT investigations are presented to state and federal prosecuting authorities. In the complex highly technical field of child abuse, neglect and exploitation (pornography, prostitution and computer exploitation), criminal investigations are necessarily time and resource consuming. At the request of other agencies, STAT investigates about 200 cases annually (sexual and physical abuse, neglect, exploitation and fatalities). Of those, almost 75% are sexual abuse or exploitation related.

The State Technical Assistance Team is available 24-hours a day, to respond to requests for assistance. STAT has eight field criminal investigators and one investigations administrator, who provide hands-on assistance to requesting agencies. The investigation administrator and the STAT Chief provide supervision and case management. This includes a computer forensics section

that was created to address the special needs of those agencies that investigate computerized child exploitation and pornography.

As noted above, effective August 2001 and pursuant to Chapter 660.520 RSMo, STAT investigators are now certified and commissioned peace officers. In response to increased requests for assistance, by internal reorganization, STAT added an investigator to the computer exploitation and pornography, while maintaining six field investigators in the Child Abuse/Neglect investigation unit. Four of these investigators are American Prosecutors Research Institute (APRI) "Finding Words" certified child interviewers.

Recognizing the importance of multidisciplinary interaction in dealing with seriously dysfunctional families and suspected child abuse and neglect, STAT facilitates cooperation and coordination among dissimilar organizations with shared responsibilities and mandates (DSS, law enforcement, prosecutors, public health, juvenile justice, coroners, medical professionals, educators, etc.). Being mindful that some agencies have multiple roles and responsibilities (investigative/enforcement, protection, service provision, etc.), STAT acts as an intermediary to bring these purposes and groups together. By acting as a coordinator between disciplines, STAT encourages communities to identify and address problems often avoided by those who lack the knowledge or confidence to become involved. To improve awareness and competence, STAT is active in training, supporting, and assisting field-level investigators and supervisors, which ultimately impacts policy and practice. All investigations are the primary responsibility of those disciplines mandated to be involved. As an integral part of the process, it is essential that the Department of Social Services form meaningful partnerships with those community services and agencies. STAT promotes this attitude of enhanced cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Beyond professionals, on request, STAT provides awareness programs to child advocacy groups and organizations.

As a result of successful pioneering efforts by Missouri and a few other states, there is now some level of the child fatality review in every state and several foreign countries. This multidisciplinary approach has proven to be a key link in the investigation and evaluation of child fatalities that ultimately leads to meaningful prevention strategies. Child fatality review is a true expression of child advocacy, and the recognition that no single agency or discipline can adequately address how and why children die.

To address the escalating and ever-changing issues associated with computerized pornography and exploitation of children, STAT has been awarded a United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program grant that has enhanced their ability to respond to what has become an international threat to children. By combining resources and expertise with local, state and federal agencies (including a partnership with the

Missouri State Highway Patrol), STAT provides leadership and assistance that transcends jurisdictional boundaries.

To maximize efficiency and effectiveness, STAT is exploring increased partnerships with other child protection agencies and organizations. If “satellite” child advocacy centers in under-populated rural areas become a reality, versus fully staffed and equipped centers, STAT will provide interview/investigative services in lieu of the need for the centers to maintain permanent staffing. From the beginning, STAT has supported and supplemented formal child advocacy centers.

While Children’s Division workers meet or exceed established educational requirements, most do not come to the job with an intimate knowledge necessary to recognize and investigate injury-related abuse. Most do not understand the complex dynamics associated with co-investigations involving law enforcement, juvenile officers, the medical community, prosecutors, etc. All are part of the child protection community, but their roles and expertise is not the same. STAT provides discipline specific and multidisciplinary training to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness in investigating children’s events. On request, STAT provides hands on multidisciplinary team building assistance.

To further enhance the investigative process, STAT provides the services of a forensic pediatrician and an evidence expert, both with national reputations, and recognized as “expert witnesses” in Missouri courts. All of these services have done much to increase the confidence and competence of those responsible for protecting Missouri’s children and families.